



LITERACY AS A VIABLE TOOL AGAINST THE OUTBREAK OF EPIDEMICS IN EBONYI STATE OF NIGERIA: THE TEACHERS' PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on investigating teachers' perception on literacy as a viable tool against the outbreak of epidemics in Ebonyi State of Nigeria. In the course of the study, three (3) research questions were formulated to guide the study, while a survey research design was adopted for the study. From a total of three hundred and four (304) teachers who constituted the population of teachers in the twelve public secondary schools in Abakaliki metropolis, a sample of one hundred and twenty (120) teachers was simple randomly selected as the sample for the study. The instrument used was a structured questionnaire with four sections. Mean and standard deviation were used as instrument for data analysis. The result of the findings revealed that the teachers, who were used in the study, agreed that literacy has really been very helpful in improving the health status of the people; it has also increased the quest for more knowledge on health education, and reduced the occurrence of the outbreak of epidemics respectively. Following some findings, recommendations and conclusions were made.

KEYWORDS: Teachers', Perception, Literacy, Viable tool, Outbreak, Epidemics.

INTRODUCTION:

One starts to learn language from the day one is born into the world. Language is used to express one's feelings and also communicate others. During early speech and language development, one learns skills that are important to the development of literacy. Literacy is a person's ability to read and write. Reading and writing are important tools that help learners function and participate in society.

Literacy is an individual's capacity to put the skill of reading and writing to work in shaping the course of his/her own life. Literacy is a complex set of abilities needed to understand and use the dominant symbol system of a culture, alphabet, numbers, visual icons for personal and community development (Analfabetismo, 2013). The nature of these abilities and the demand for them vary from one context to another. It focuses on the capacity of individuals to use and make critical judgments about the information they encounter on a daily basis.

Literacy as defined by UNESCO (2010), is the ability of a person to function in all the activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in the learner's group and community and also for enabling the learner to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his/her own and the community's development. No matter how we define literacy, it must touch every aspect of individual and community life. It is an essential foundation for learning throughout life and must be valued as a human right.

Many writers have mentioned the power to affect human life and the society which literacy has, noting that literacy has the power to transform both human life and social structure. Ampene (1980:2), claims that the usefulness of literacy cannot be denied, insisting that literacy is a tool for liberation and enrichment of both individual life and social dignity. Bhola, (1983) argues that without literacy there cannot be development. He further uses literacy as a necessary tool for the reduction of poverty

Literacy is thought to have first emerged with the development of numeracy and computational devices as early as 8,000 BC. According to Chrisomalis, (2009), independent script development occurred at four times in human history in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Mesoamerica and China. The earliest forms of written communication originated in summer located in southern Mesopotamia in 8,000 BC. Peter Easton states during this era, literacy was largely functional matter propelled by the need to manage the new qualities of information and the new type of governance created by trade and large scale production. Denise Schmandt – Besserat, (1978), argues that writing system in Mesopotamia first emerged from a recording system in which people used impressed token markings to manage trade and agricultural production. The token system served as a precursor to early cuneiform writing once people began simply recording information on clay tablets. This text exhibits not only numerical signs but also ideograms depicting objects being counted. These examples indicate that early acts of literacy were closely tied to power and chiefly used for management practices (Analfabetismo, 2013).

Education is the most viable legacy left behind by our colonial masters. It is the only heritage bequeathed to us which is well embraced because of its usefulness in shaping our society and building of an individual (Jefferson, 2008). Education over a time has played a significant role in bringing solutions to virtually all the

problems that confront man in his day-to-day activities. In the same line of thought, Olahinde (2001) pointed that education has transformed life from cruel slavery of nature to a glorious enjoyment. Nwoye, (2000), affirmed that education is the aggregate of all the process by which a child or adult develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behavior which are of positive value to the society in which he lives. That is to say, that education is the process of disseminating knowledge either to ensure social control or guarantee rational direction of the society or both. In real sense of it, education stands at all times as an instrument per excellence for achieving growth, progress and national development.

According to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 6th edition, education is the process of training and instructing, especially of children and young people in the schools, colleges, etc. From the above assertion, it is therefore observed that the job of training a child (education) is basically the work of the teachers who not only help the parents in transforming their children from a less relevant crude being to a refined and highly valuable being, but also help in producing society builders and solution providers to the society. While a teacher is someone who shows somebody how to do something so that he/she will be able to do it on his/her own. It went further to add that to teach or teaching could mean to encourage people to accept something as a fact or principles. Perception of teachers on the efficacy of literacy in the war against epidemic outbreak has to do with the view, opinion or even observation of teachers on the efficacy of literacy in the war against epidemic outbreak.

In the recent past, many life ravaging epidemics have confronted man such as: small pox, chicken pox, HIV/AIDS, malaria, even the most recent dreaded disease called Ebola, etc, but knowledge acquired in the course of educating the people by all the various agencies used by the government to teach the people have practically fought them to a standstill. Looking at the perception of teachers on the efficacy of literacy in the war against epidemic outbreak in Abakaliki metropolis, it should therefore be noted that the action of teachers has spoken louder than their voice, particularly in Abakaliki metropolis.

Recently, there was news of an outbreak of a disease called Ebola in the country; government in no small measure took a proactive measure in fighting the scourge to a standstill. Perception of teachers was never hidden especially when it came to a time of reopening of schools in the country, they made their perception open by rejecting the government proposed date of school resumption pointing that government should guarantee them that the society is now save before school should open, Nigeria (Newsonline, 2014).

According to Ezike (1998), teachers have engaged in a lot of selfless services in making sure that the society is equipped with various skills that will not only help them to overcome the health challenges that confront them from time to time, but also to make life more meaningful to the society in general, irrespective of the government low incentives and motivation to teachers in terms of condition of service which cut across salary levels, job security, social recognition, etc. Their jobs seem to be selfless service since the works of the teachers are nowhere close to what they are being paid. Nwoye (2000), notes that in talking about teachers, that one's mind should not be limited to those who teach either in primary schools, secondary schools or tertiary institutions but to everyone who engages in the business of training the minds of the young ones or the youth.

To determine the perception of teachers over the efficacy of literacy in the war against epidemic outbreak in Abakaliki metropolis, we therefore have to look at who a teacher is. Ugwu (2006), defined a teacher as a person, who engages himself with the job of helping someone to learn in order to increase his/her knowledge or ideas. According to Wikipedia (2014), a teacher is a person who delivers an educational programme, assesses students' participation in an educational programme, and/or administers or provides consistent and substantial leadership to an educational programme. It went further to point that this has to be in a school or any other setting delivering educational programme that is prescribed by the education act of the land. To Smith (2001), a teacher is a person who does the job of directing, guiding, supervising and correcting another person to develop an expected behavior or character. He went further to note that parents are even the first teacher to any child, meaning that a parent is a teacher.

Perception of teachers on the efficacy of literacy in the war against epidemic outbreak in Abakaliki metropolis deals with the view, discernment or opinion of teachers (school teachers) on the worth, value or usefulness of using literacy in the war against epidemic outbreak in Abakaliki metropolis. As earlier noted, the view points or perceptions of teachers in this issue have been more pragmatic than theoretical, since they are always committed to the course of championing both mental and moral development of the child in society, which act as a weapon in fighting any societal challenge or epidemic outbreak in the society. Bard (2006), noted that the commitment of teachers in the job of training the minds of the young ones or the youth has demonstrated their view or perception on the efficacy of literacy in fighting social problems, (epidemic outbreak in the society inclusive).

The perception of teachers in the efficacy of literacy in the world today is like an open wound. Teachers have for time immemorial perceived that education (literacy) is the only solution to the world problems. The former governor of Ebonyi State, Chief Ominyi Samuel Egwu, in 2003, noted as a teacher that "education is the only solution to the backwardness of Ebonyians" hence his introduction of free and compulsory primary and secondary education in the State and also awarding of scholarship to higher institutions to many Ebonyians. In the course of this work, we will be made to use statistical report and analysis to find out the true perception of teachers on the efficacy of literacy in the war against epidemic outbreak in Abakaliki metropolis.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

Over the years, teachers have been one of the major instruments in the building of any society. This justifies the saying that "the society is equal to the type of teachers in it". Ugwu (2006), noted that the building of any sound society cannot be achieved without the overall commitment of the teachers who embark on the job of equipping the young ones for the future survival and sustenance of the society.

A wise society always sought for teachers' opinions whenever any issue of concern to the society is presented. That is why it is said that the level of regards a nation gives to their teachers determines the type of future the society will have. A well planned society does not wait until epidemic outbreak confronts them

before planning how to fight it; rather they plan in advance (Nwali, 2000). In Abakaliki metropolis, epidemic outbreaks like guinea worm, diarrhea, etc have been fought in the time past with every sense of commitment and seriousness.

The war against the outbreak of epidemics in Abakaliki metropolis requires a collective effort of every well meaning member of the society, the perception of every member of the society determines their level of commitment in fighting any scourge and since education or literacy has always played a significant role in solving any societal problem, the problem of this study put in question form is: what are the perceptions of teachers on the viability of literacy as a tool in the fight against epidemic outbreak in Ebonyi State?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

Specifically the study sought to find out the perception of teachers on the viability of literacy as a tool against outbreak of epidemics and how it can contribute to health improvement in the area, increase the quest for education in the area, and finally reduce the occurrence of the outbreak of epidemics in the area.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

In the course of the study, the following questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. How do teachers' perceptions on the use of literacy as a viable tool against outbreak of epidemics contribute to the health improvement of the people?
2. How do teachers' views on the use of literacy as a tool against outbreak of epidemics increase the societal quest for education?
3. How do teachers' perceptions on the viability of literacy as a tool against epidemic outbreak reduce the occurrence of epidemic outbreak?

METHODOLOGY:

The study adopted a survey research design. The population of the study consists OF 304 teachers in twelve (12) public owned secondary schools in

Abakaliki metropolis of Ebonyi State and a simple random sampling technique was used for the study. Six (6) secondary schools were selected with twenty teachers from each school as the respondents for the study, thereby making it total of (120) teachers that formed the sample for the study. The researcher used a structured questionnaire as instrument for data collection and its validation was done by giving the first draft of the instrument to the experts in the Department of Science Education of Ebonyi State University and finally, their corrections and suggestions were used to produce the final version of the instrument. Cronbach alfa was used to establish the reliability of the instrument and a reliability index of 85 was achieved. The analysis of the data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation.

4. **Research Question One:** How do teachers' perceptions on the use of literacy as a viable tool against outbreak of epidemics contribute to the health improvement of the people?

Table 1: Teachers' Perception on the Use of literacy in Health Improvement of People

S/N	Item questions	SA	A	D	SD	FX	X	SD	Decision
1	Teachers' perception influences their level of readiness in promoting healthy society	63	51	5	2	420	3.5	1.87	Agree
2	They influence the ways children are taught on the need for a healthy environment	60	42	15	3	399	3.33	1.82	Agree
3	They affects the believe of the society on education and healthy living through their teaching.	47	55	14	4	385	3.21	1.79	Agree
4	Their perceptions often affect the levels of social rejection of any epidemic outbreak	61	43	12	4	401	3.34	1.82	Agree
5	Their view always helps to Influence the government in Providing health facilities in the society.	58	51	8	3	404	3.37	1.83	Agree
Grand mean =		16.75/5 = 3.35							

From the result of the responses gotten from the respondents as indicated above, it is observed that teachers' perceptions on the viability of literacy as a tool against epidemic outbreak contribute to health improvement in the society. Investigation into this idea was done using five item questions, and from the responses, there is a positive development on the influence of literacy as a viable

weapon. Item questions 1 – 5 recorded mean ratings of: 3.5, 3.33, 3.21, 3.34 and 3.37 respectively and in all, a grand mean record of 3.35 was gotten.

5. **Research Question Two:** How do teachers' views on the use of literacy as a tool against outbreak of epidemics increase the societal quest for education?

Table 2: Teachers' Perceptions on how the Use of Literacy will Increase Societal Quest for Education

S/N	Item questions	SA	A	D	SD	FX	X	SD	Decision
1	Teachers' views often expose the importance of education/literacy to the people in the society	71	42	6	1	423	3.53	1.87	Agree
2	They always have means of encouraging children to show more interest in literacy through their exposures	69	35	12	4	409	3.41	1.84	Agree
3	They build peoples' interest In literacy through their dissemination of information.	32	52	6	30	326	2.72	1.64	Agree
4	The ways of expressing their views sometimes compel people to go for further literacy programme	60	51	7	2	409	3.41	1.84	Agree
5	Their views often make people see literacy as a security to good health	50	50	17	3	387	3.23	1.79	Agree
Grand mean =		16.3/5 = 3.26							

6. In Table two, the second research question on how teachers' views on the use of literacy as a tool against outbreak of epidemics increase the societal quest for education was surveyed and from the responses which produced the following mean on each question items: 3.53, 3.41, 2.72, 3.41 and 3.23 respectively and finally, a grand mean response of 3.26, there is a strong indication that teachers have high perceptions on the potency of literacy in the fight against outbreak of epidemics in society because knowledge is power

and through literacy, the society has always witnessed liberation through knowledge sharing.

Research Question Three: How do teachers' perceptions on the viability of literacy as a tool against epidemic outbreak reduce the occurrence of epidemic outbreak?

Table 3: Teachers' Perception on Literacy as a tool that Reduces Occurrence of Epidemic Outbreak

S/N	Item questions	SA	A	D	SD	FX	X	SD	Decision
1	Teachers' views often help the people to be aware of health need in the society.	65	48	5	2	416	3.47	1.86	Agree
2	Their perception sometimes inform the people of the ways of avoiding dirty environment.	63	44	12	1	409	3.41	1.84	Agree
3	Teachers' perception always Make people conscious of healthy living and healthy environment.	54	56	8	2	202	3.35	1.83	Agree
4	It makes the people to be assured that healthy environment is vital to life.	72	43	5	0	427	3.56	1.88	Agree
5	Teachers' perception always promote health awareness in the society.	54	57	9	0	405	3.38	1.83	Agree
Grand mean =		17.17/5 = 3.43							

Table three investigated how teachers' perception in the viability of literacy against epidemic outbreak reduces the occurrences of epidemic outbreak particularly in Abakaliki metropolis. Responses gotten from the respondents showed that: teachers' perception often help the people to be aware of health need in the society, sometimes inform the people of the ways of averting dirty environment, and increase the number of people that are conscious of healthy living and healthy environment. This goes to confirm the assertion that teachers are nation builders and their means of information dissemination is parallel to nothing. Therefore, literacy is one of the tools through which the society is changed for good.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

At the end of the data analysis, the following findings were made:

1. That teachers' perception on the efficacy of literacy in the war against epidemic outbreak contribute to health improvement in society.
2. That teachers' view on the efficacy of literacy in the war against epidemic outbreak increases the people's quest for education in the society, since they are seen as the epitome of knowledge when it comes to learning.
3. That teachers' perception on the efficacy of literacy in the war against epidemic outbreak is capable of reducing the occurrence of epidemic outbreak in the society.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS:

This study has explored various issues relating to epidemic, its outbreak and control in the society, concept of teacher/literacy, the role of teachers in the society, the effect of epidemic outbreak in the society, ways of promoting teachers' effectiveness in the building of a strong and healthy society in addition to control of epidemic outbreak in the society. From the results of the findings in research question 1, the perceptions of teachers on the use of literacy in health improvement, there is strong confirmation of the earlier finding of Ugwu (2006), who noted that the building of any sound society cannot be achieved without the overall commitment of the teachers who embark on the job of equipping the young ones for the future survival and sustenance of the society. A knowledgeable society is the one that well informed. Literacy is one of the viable tools that would help improve the health status of the people. During the outbreak of Ebola in Nigeria, different kinds of means were used to disseminate information on the survival strategy. Both the literate and the illiterates were all reached through the power of literacy. The awareness created, helped the public to be cautious simple health hygiene.

The second research question lends credence on the fact that literacy gingers the willing heart to search for more knowledge. This confirms the assertion of Nwoye, (2000), that education is the aggregate of all the process by which a child or adult develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behavior which are of positive value to the society in which he lives. That is to say, that education is the process of disseminating knowledge either to ensure social control or guarantee rational direction of the society or both. In real sense of it, education stands at all times as an instrument per excellence for achieving growth, progress and national development. Literacy and education are used interchangeably in this paper because both of them transform lives and liberate us from the shackles of ignorance.

In summary, it is therefore established that; the role of teachers in the society is very important since they are the producers of every other professionals in the society including the political leaders and the health officials. Literacy which has been defined as the ability to read and write has the potential to empower and liberate us from ignorance. A reading nation is a thriving nation. The weapon of literacy is a viable tool against the scourge of epidemics not only in Nigeria but in the whole world. Through the use of literacy, awareness is created and people

learn how to combat any epidemic outbreak and this also portrays the potency of teachers in the building of a strong and healthy society.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY:

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. That government should as a matter of importance encourage teachers in their teaching job by equipping them with the necessary health teaching aids, with conducive teaching and learning environment that will engender supportive role to the teachers in the course of their teaching activities.
2. The school system should partner with the health institutions in the society to enable them be adequately informed on the various ways and means of supporting the society in the war against epidemic outbreak
3. Since the teachers are the producers of various professionals in the society, it will be important for the society to give the teachers maximum support, both socially, emotionally, politically and even culturally in the course of their teaching work so as to enable them be at their best in serving the society.

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